

Risala: Ibn Fadlan's Account of the Rus

Source: H.M. Smyser, "Ibn Fadlan's Account of the *Rus* with Some Commentary and Some Allusions to Beowulf," *Franciplegius: Medieval and Linguistic Studies in Honor of Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr.*, ed. Jess B. Bessinger Jr. and Robert P. Creed (New York: New York University Press. 1965), pp. 92-119. *Viking Answer Lady Webpage*, 2009, <http://www.vikinganswerlady.com/ibn_fdl.html#Risala> (20th August 2009).

Ibn Fadlan was an Arab chronicler. In 921 C.E., the Caliph of Baghdad sent Ibn Fadlan with an embassy to the King of the Bulgars of the Middle Volga. Ibn Fadlan wrote an account of his journeys with the embassy, called a Risala. This Risala is of great value as a history, although it is clear in some places that inaccuracies and Ibn Fadlan's own prejudices have slanted the account to some extent.

During the course of his journey, Ibn Fadlan met a people called the Rus, a group of Swedish origin, acting as traders in the Bulgar capital. The first allusion to the Rus comes toward the close of the description of the Bulgars. When the Rus or people of another race came with slaves for sale, the king of the Bulgars had a right to choose one slave in each ten for himself. The full description begins:

§ 80. I have seen the *Rus* as they came on their merchant journeys and encamped by the Volga. I have never seen more perfect physical specimens, tall as date palms, blonde and ruddy; they wear neither tunics nor caftans, but the men wear a garment which covers one side of the body and leaves a hand free.

Note: Although Ibn Fadlan here says the men go without "tunic or caftan," he later describes the funeral of a Rus chieftain, who is specially dressed in both tunic and caftan before cremation (§ 89). The tunic probably corresponds to Old Norse kyrtil, "a knee-length tunic with sleeves which was worn belted." The caftan is a heavy woolen overgarment, known in Old Norse as an ólpa. The "garment which covers one side of the body and leaves a hand free" must be the Norse rectangular cloak (Old Norse möttull, skikkja, or feldr) which was worn pinned at the right shoulder leaving the sword-hand free.

§ 81. Each man has an axe, a sword, and a knife and keeps each by him at all times. The swords are broad and grooved, of Frankish sort. Every man is tattooed from finger nails to neck with dark green (or green or blue-black) trees, figures, etc.

§ 82. Each woman wears on either breast a box of iron, silver, copper or gold; the value of the box indicates the wealth of the husband. Each box has a ring from which depends a knife. The women wear neck rings of gold and silver, one for each 10,000 *dirhams* which her husband is worth; some women have many. Their most prized ornaments are beads of green glass of the same make as ceramic objects one finds on their ships. They trade beads among themselves and they pay an exaggerated price for them, for they buy them for a *dirham* apiece. They string them as necklaces for their women.

I. In place of gold the *Rus* use sable skins. No standard measure is known in the land; they buy and sell by dry measure. They are very fond of pork and many of them who have assumed the garb of [Islam] miss it very much.

II. The *Rus* are a great host, all of them red haired; they are big men with white bodies. The women of this land have boxes made, according to their circumstances and means, out of gold, silver, and wood. From childhood they bind these to their breasts so that their breasts will not grow larger. Each man puts a chain around his wife's neck for each thousand dinars of his wealth.

Note: The preceding two paragraphs are from the 16th century C.E. Persian geographer Amin Razi, who has taken Ibn Fadlan's observation and attempted to devise a reason for the observation, thus mistakenly assuming that Ibn Fadlan's "breast boxes: - - actually the tortoise-shell shaped brooches of the Nordic woman's costume -- are used to control breast size, rather than being simple ornamentation.)

§ 83. They are the filthiest of God's creatures. They have no modesty in defecation and urination, nor do they wash after pollution from orgasm, nor do they wash their hands after eating. Thus they are like wild asses. When they have come from their land and anchored on, or ties up at the shore of the Volga, which is a great river, they build big houses of wood on the shore, each holding ten to twenty persons more or less. Each man has a couch on which he sits. With them are pretty slave girls destined for sale to merchants: a man will have sexual intercourse with his slave girl while his companion looks on. Sometimes whole groups will come together in this fashion, each in the presence of others. A merchant who arrives to buy a slave girl from them may have to wait and look on while a *Rus* completes the act of intercourse with a slave girl.

§ 84. Every day they must wash their faces and heads and this they do in the dirtiest and filthiest fashion possible: to wit, every morning a girl servant brings a great basin of water; she offers this to her master and he washes his hands and face and his hair -- he washes it and combs it out with a comb in the water; then he blows his nose and spits into the basin. When he has finished, the servant carries the basin to the next person, who does likewise. She carries the basin thus to all the household in turn, and each blows his nose, spits, and washes his face and hair in it.

Note: Ibn Fadlan's main source of disgust with the Rus bathing customs have to do with his Islamic faith, which requires a pious [Muslim] to wash only in running water or water poured from a container so that the rinsings do not again touch the bather. The sagas often describe a woman washing a man's hair for him, often as a gesture of affection. It would be likely that the basin was actually emptied between each bath: Ibn Fadlan would still have felt the basin contaminated by previous use. It does seem here that Ibn Fadlan may be exaggerating a bit for effect.

§ 85. When the ships come to this mooring place, everybody goes ashore with bread, meat, onions, milk and intoxicating drink and betakes himself to a long upright piece of wood that has a face like a man's and is surrounded by little figures, behind which are

long stakes in the ground. The *Rus* prostrates himself before the big carving and says, "O my Lord, I have come from a far land and have with me such and such a number of girls and such and such a number of sables", and he proceeds to enumerate all his other wares. Then he says, "I have brought you these gifts," and lays down what he has brought with him, and continues, "I wish that you would send me a merchant with many *dinars* and *dirhams*, who will buy from me whatever I wish and will not dispute anything I say." Then he goes away.

If he has difficulty selling his wares and his stay is prolonged, he will return with a gift a second or third time. If he has still further difficulty, he will bring a gift to all the little idols and ask their intercession, saying, "These are the wives of our Lord and his daughters and sons." And he addresses each idol in turn, asking intercession and praying humbly. Often the selling goes more easily and after selling out he says, "My Lord has satisfied my desires; I must repay him," and he takes a certain number of sheep or cattle and slaughters them, gives part of the meat as alms, brings the rest and deposits it before the great idol and the little idols around it, and suspends the heads of the cattle or sheep on the stakes. In the night, dogs come and eat all, but the one who has made the offering says, "Truly, my Lord is content with me and has consumed the present I brought him."

§ 86. An ill person is put in a tent apart with some bread and water and people do not come to speak to him; they do not come even to see him every day, especially if he is a poor man or a slave. If he recovers, he returns to them, and if he dies, they cremate him. If he is a slave, he is left to be eaten by dogs and birds of prey. If the *Rus* catch a thief or robber, they hang him on a tall tree and leave him hanging until his body falls in pieces.

§ 87. I heard that at the deaths of their chief personages they did many things, of which the least was cremation, and I was interested to learn more. At last I was told of the death of one of their outstanding men. They placed him in a grave and put a roof over it for ten days, while they cut and sewed garments for him.

If the deceased is a poor man they make a little boat, which they lay him in and burn. If he is rich, they collect his goods and divide them into three parts, one for his family, another to pay for his clothing, and a third for making intoxicating drink, which they drink until the day when his female slave will kill herself and be burned with her master. They stupefy themselves by drinking this beer night and day; sometimes one of them dies cup in hand.

Alt: They burn him in this fashion: they leave him for the first ten days in a grave. His possessions they divide into three parts: one part for his daughters and wives; another for garments to clothe the corpse; another part covers the cost of the intoxicating drink which they consume in the course of ten days, uniting sexually with women and playing musical instruments. Meanwhile, the slave girl who gives herself to be burned with him, in these ten days drinks and indulges in pleasure; she decks her head and her person with all sorts of ornaments and fine dress and so arrayed gives herself to the men.

When a great personage dies, the people of his family ask his young women and men slaves, "Who among you will die with him?" One answers, "I." Once he or she has said that, the thing is obligatory: there is no backing out of it. Usually it is one of the girl slaves who do this.

§ 88. When the man of whom I have spoken died, his girl slaves were asked, "Who will die with him?" One answered, "I." She was then put in the care of two young women, who watched over her and accompanied her everywhere, to the point that they occasionally washed her feet with their own hands. Garments were being made for the deceased and all else was being readied of which he had need. Meanwhile the slave drinks every day and sings, giving herself over to pleasure.

§ 89. When the day arrived on which the man was to be cremated and the girl with him, I went to the river on which was his ship. I saw that they had drawn the ship onto the shore, and that they had erected four posts of birch wood and other wood, and that around the ship was made a structure like great ship's tents out of wood. Then they pulled the ship up until it was on this wooden construction. Then they began to come and go and to speak words which I did not understand, while the man was still in his grave and had not yet been brought out. The tenth day, having drawn the ship up onto the river bank, they guarded it. In the middle of the ship they prepared a dome or pavilion of wood and covered this with various sorts of fabrics. Then they brought a couch and put it on the ship and covered it with a mattress of Greek brocade. Then came an old woman whom they call the Angel of Death, and she spread upon the couch the furnishings mentioned. It is she who has charge of the clothes-making and arranging all things, and it is she who kills the girl slave. I saw that she was a strapping old woman, fat and louring.

When they came to the grave they removed the earth from above the wood, then the wood, and took out the dead man clad in the garments in which he had died. I saw that he had grown black from the cold of the country. They put intoxicating drink, fruit, and a stringed instrument in the grave with him. They removed all that. The dead man did not smell bad, and only his color had changed. They dressed him in trousers, stockings, boots, a tunic, and caftan of brocade with gold buttons. They put a hat of brocade and fur on him. Then they carried him into the pavilion on the ship. They seated him on the mattress and propped him up with cushions. They brought intoxicating drink, fruits, and fragrant plants, which they put with him, then bread, meat, and onions, which they placed before him. Then they brought a dog, which they cut in two and put in the ship. Then they brought his weapons and placed them by his side. Then they took two horses, ran them until they sweated, then cut them to pieces with a sword and put them in the ship. Next they killed a rooster and a hen and threw them in. The girl slave who wished to be killed went here and there and into each of their tents, and the master of each tent had sexual intercourse with her and said, "Tell your lord I have done this out of love for him."

§ 90. Friday afternoon they led the slave girl to a thing that they had made which resembled a door frame. She placed her feet on the palms of the men and they raised her up to overlook this frame. She spoke some words and they lowered her again. A second time they raised her up and she did again what she had done; then they lowered her. They

raised her a third time and she did as she had done the two times before. Then they brought her a hen; she cut off the head, which she threw away, and then they took the hen and put it in the ship. I asked the interpreter what she had done. He answered, "The first time they raised her she said, 'Behold, I see my father and mother.' The second time she said, 'I see all my dead relatives seated.' The third time she said, 'I see my master seated in Paradise and Paradise is beautiful and green; with him are men and boy servants. He calls me. Take me to him.' " Now they took her to the ship. She took off the two bracelets she was wearing and gave them both to the old woman called the Angel of Death, who was to kill her; then she took off the two finger rings which she was wearing and gave them to the two girls who had served her and were the daughters of the woman called the Angel of Death. Then they raised her onto the ship but they did not make her enter the pavilion.

Alt. After that, the group of men who have cohabitated with the slave girl make of their hands a sort of paved way whereby the girl, placing her feet on the palms of their hands, mounts onto the ship.

The men came with shields and sticks. She was given a cup of intoxicating drink; she sang at taking it and drank. The interpreter told me that she in this fashion bade farewell to all her girl companions. Then she was given another cup; she took it and sang for a long time while the old woman incited her to drink up and go into the pavilion where her master lay. I saw that she was distracted; she wanted to enter the pavilion but put her head between it and the boat. Then the old woman seized her head and made her enter the pavilion and entered with her. Thereupon the men began to strike with the sticks on the shields so that her cries could not be heard and the other slave girls would not seek to escape death with their masters. Then six men went into the pavilion and each had intercourse with the girl. Then they laid her at the side of her master; two held her feet and two her hands; the old woman known as the Angel of Death re-entered and looped a cord around her neck and gave the crossed ends to the two men for them to pull. Then she approached her with a broad-bladed dagger, which she plunged between her ribs repeatedly, and the men strangled her with the cord until she was dead.

§ 91. Then the closest relative of the dead man, after they had placed the girl whom they have killed beside her master, came, took a piece of wood which he lighted at a fire, and walked backwards with the back of his head toward the boat and his face turned toward the people, with one hand holding the kindled stick and the other covering his anus, being completely naked, for the purpose of setting fire to the wood that had been made ready beneath the ship. Then the people came up with tinder and other fire wood, each holding a piece of wood of which he had set fire to an end and which he put into the pile of wood beneath the ship. Thereupon the flames engulfed the wood, then the ship, the pavilion, the man, the girl, and everything in the ship. A powerful, fearful wind began to blow so that the flames became fiercer and more intense.

Alt: After the girl is slain, two relatives of the dead take brands and set the ship on fire, so that the dead man and the ship are shortly burned to ashes. If in this moment a wind blows and the fire is strengthened and the ashes are dispersed, the man is accordingly one

who belongs in Paradise; otherwise they take the dead to be one unwelcome at the threshold of bliss or even to be condemned. When two people among them quarrel and the dissension is prolonged and the king is unable to reconcile them, he commands that they fight with swords; he who wins is right.

§ 92. One of the *Rus* was at my side and I heard him speak to the interpreter, who was present. I asked the interpreter what he said. He answered, "He said, 'You Arabs are fools.' " "Why?" I asked him. He said, "You take the people who are most dear to you and whom you honor most and put them into the ground where insects and worms devour them. We burn him in a moment, so that he enters Paradise at once." Then he began to laugh uproariously. When I asked why he laughed, he said, "His Lord, for love of him, has sent the wind to bring him away in an hour." And actually an hour had not passed before the ship, the wood, the girl, and her master were nothing but cinders and ashes.

Then they constructed in the place where had been the ship which they had drawn up out of the river something like a small round hill, in the middle of which they erected a great post of birch wood, on which they wrote the name of the man and the name of the *Rus* king and they departed.

§ 93. It is the custom of the king of the *Rus* to have with him in his palace four hundred men, the bravest of his companions and those on whom he can rely. These are the men who die with him and let themselves be killed for him. Each has a female slave who serves him, washes his head, and prepares all that he eats and drinks, and he also has another female slave with whom he sleeps. These four hundred men sit about the king's throne, which is immense and encrusted with fine precious stones. With him on the throne sit forty female slaves destined for his bed. Occasionally he has intercourse with one of them in the presence of his companions of whom we have spoken, without coming down from the throne. When he needs to answer a call of nature, he uses a basin. When he wants to ride out, his horse is brought up to the throne and he mounts. If he wishes to dismount, he rides up so that he can dismount onto the throne. He has a lieutenant who commands his troops, makes war upon his enemies, and plays his role vis-à-vis his subjects.

Outstanding men among them are inclined to occupy themselves with tanning and are not ashamed of this lowly occupation. The cloth of these lands and localities is famous, especially that of their capital, which is called *Kyawh*. Famous and noted cities of the *Rus* are *Crsk* and *Hrqh*.

Note: Here Ibn Fadlan is reporting hearsay about the distant capital of the Rus and the state in which their king resides. While the jewel-encrusted throne is certainly an exaggeration, the war-band that surrounds the king is reminiscent of the comitatus of Germanic practice. While it does seem extremely unlikely that the Rus king would mount and dismount from his horse directly from his high seat in the hall, Yngvars Saga tells of one instance in which warriors ride into a hall and up to the king's throne there. The Rus king's delegation of war-making and civil administration to a lieutenant is not a Norse practice, but rather seems to be borrowed from the practice of the Khagan (King) of the

Khazars or other Turkish tribes, who would appoint an official termed a bey for these activities.

The translation of the Rus section Ibn Fadlan's Risala, as given above, is a composite of the handful of surviving manuscript versions.